Shifting Parties, Sophisticated Switchers?

Are Voters Responsive to Ideological Shifts by Political Parties?

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ABSTRACT

The trend towards increasing electoral volatility has triggered a rich literature investigating which voters are most likely to switch parties in subsequent elections. Less is known, however, on the role parties play in causing voters to switch parties. From a Downsian perspective we assume that changes in parties' ideological positions should cause voters to switch parties from one election to another. The current paper addresses these shortcomings in the literature by bringing together literature on volatility and research on responsiveness to political party. For doing so, we make use of the data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project. The results presented in this paper show that parties' ideological shifts are indeed causing voters to switch parties. The extent to which this mechanism of accountability functions, however, is partly dependent on individual- as well as contextual-level factors.

KEYWORDS

comparative politics; elections, volatility, political sophistication, voter responsiveness

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1. INTRODUCTION

Even though the founding fathers of electoral research were already intrigued by voters who switch parties and their characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1964; Converse, 1962), a number of questions on the mechanisms causing voters to switch parties remain. As a prime example, the debate on how political sophistication relates to electoral volatility is still on-going (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2007). The importance of investigating this question lies in the normative implication of whether it is the high or low politically sophisticated who are most likely to switch parties. In elections, the balance of power rests with those voters who switch parties. Ideally, therefore, these switches are based on well-considered decisions by knowledgeable and interested citizens (Granberg & Holmberg, 1990).

Investigating this research puzzle, previous research has addressed the question of whether it is high or low sophisticated voters who switch parties most (Dassonneville, 2012, 2014; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2004). Others have drawn attention to the ideological distance bridged by voters switching parties and the need to take into account whether voters switch to ideological close or more distant parties (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; van der Meer, Lubbe, van Elsas, Elff, & van der Brug, 2012). In this paper, we claim that all of these studies are overlooking a crucial element by not taking into account shifts at the party level when assessing the characteristics of floating voters. The assumption in research on the link between political sophistication and volatility is simply that high sophisticates make well-considered decisions and low sophisticates don't. Instead of making that inference, we more directly investigate the actual mechanism that makes voters switch parties from one election to another. For concluding whether or not party switchers are *whimsical* (van der Meer, Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2014), it does not suffice to look at how politically sophisticated voters are. What we should investigate is the extent to which voters are responsive to parties' behaviour – i.e. the extent to which voters change their vote as parties shift their position.

The theoretical foundations for bringing parties into research on the causes of electoral volatility are to be found in the responsible party model (Arnold & Franklin, 2012; Sartori, 1968). There is strong empirical evidence pointing out that parties and their voters do have largely similar ideological opinions (Costello, Thomassen, & Rosema, 2012; Dalton, 1985). Furthermore, this correlation has been shown to be dynamic and so in two ways. Parties have

been found to adjust their positions in response to the electorate and citizens were found to be responsive to parties changing stances as well (Adams, Ezrow, & Leiter, 2012; Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-Topcu, 2014; Adams & Somer-Topcu, 2009; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013). The latter phenomenon is what we assume to be an important causal mechanism explaining why voters change parties from one election to another.

We first discuss previous research on electoral volatility and why political sophistication is regularly looked at for understanding the causes and consequences of volatility. In a next section, we elaborate on why we expect ideological shifts at the party-level to be of importance in this debate. After formulating our hypotheses, we present the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, which is the data source used for investigating this question. We subsequently present our results and we end with some conclusions of the implications of our findings and thoughts for further research.

2. UNSOPHISTICATED SWITCHERS?

The question whether party switching is an expression of high or low political sophistication and involvement has been a source for debate in the literature on voting behaviour ever since the 1950s. Berelson *et al.* (1954) investigated the characteristics of voters changing parties in the course of an electoral campaign and came to the conclusion that *"Stability in vote is characteristic of those interested in politics and instability of those not particularly interested"* (Berelson et al., 1954: 20). This observation, which has been coined as 'the floating voter hypothesis, has consequently sparked a normatively loaded debate on the link between political sophistication and volatility. These findings have been interpreted as being at odds with what an ideal type democracy should look like. If Berelson and his colleagues have it right, the implication is that alterations in election results and therefore in governance are driven by changes among the least interested part of the electorate (Granberg & Holmberg, 1990).

Further studies on the link between volatility have refined the original 'floating voter hypothesis' somewhat. It has been argued and empirically found to be valuable to think of a non-linear relation between political sophistication and volatility. Low sophisticated voters are unlikely to perceive a lot of political information and hence thought to rely on habitual cues, leading to stability in voting behaviour. High sophisticates on the other hand, do receive

a lot of political information, but their well-developed political attitudes are assumed to make them resistant to changing their behaviour accordingly. As a consequence, it is the middle sophisticated who are thought and found to be most likely to switch parties – either during a campaign period or from one election to another (Converse, 1962; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2007).

A second refinement can be found in the work of Russell Dalton (1984, 2012, 2013), who claims that electorates have changed fundamentally since the early voting studies were published. According to Dalton, a group of high cognitively mobilised apartisans has emerged. This group of voters is politically sophisticated and for that reason does not have to rely on partisanship to guide vote choices. Instead, these voters are free to choose independently and from one election to another what party to vote for. As a consequence, volatility in recent decades can be related to high levels of interest and involvement in politics, which would fit to the democratic ideal (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). Dalton's theoretical accounts, however, are contested in a number of studies pointing out that the empirical evidence points in opposite directions (Albright, 2009; Dassonneville, Hooghe, & Vanhoutte, 2012, 2014; Marthaler, 2008).

Thirdly, some nuance has been added to the debate by scholars pointing out that even though levels of volatility can be substantial, most switching is still confined to particular ideological blocs (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; van der Meer et al., 2012; van der Meer et al., 2014). Taking into account the directionality of switching, these studies furthermore indicate that only switching between ideologically distant parties is clearly linked to low levels of political sophistication (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; van der Meer et al., 2014).

Regardless of the refinements made, all research investigating the link between political sophistication and volatility shares the same underlying assumption. It is thought that if volatility is associated to high levels of political sophistication or involvement into politics, this would foster what is generally referred to as a democratic ideal of voters judging *"candidates and parties on their policies and governmental performance"* (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002: 60)

3. PARTY POSITION SHIFTS

High sophisticated party switchers could indeed be argued to be a necessary condition for volatility to advance the democratic ideal. We argue, however, that merely looking at levels of political sophistication, interest or involvement is not sufficient for drawing strong conclusions in this debate. From a Downsian perspective on voting, voters need not be fully informed on parties' positions or the issues at stake to make rational decisions (Downs, 1957). Instead, what we should investigate is therefore whether party switching results from voters' assessment of how the government has performed or voters' judgements of parties' policies and ideological positions (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). It is this latter consideration that is central in this paper.

For the assumption that party switching is indeed driven by ideological shifts of parties to be a possibility, three conditions should be met. First, that voters do vote for parties that have ideological positions that closely match their own opinions. Second, that parties change their positions from one election to another. And third, that voters perceive change when parties shift their ideological positions or policies. The literature offers evidence validating each of these three conditions.

First, in representative democracies, it is deemed essential that parties' ideological positions are consistent with how their voters think about policy. According to the 'responsible party model' sufficient ideological congruence between citizens and parties ensures a link between the public opinion and policy (Adams et al., 2014; Costello et al., 2012; Dalton, 1985). Strong empirical evidence does substantiate the claim that voters have policy opinions that closely match the positions of the parties they vote for (Costello et al., 2012; Dalton, 1985).

Second, parties have previously been found not to be inert actors, but to change ideological and policy positions over time. Different mechanisms are generally referred to as why parties do so. Somer-Topcu (2009) for example found parties winning elections to be less likely to subsequently change positions than parties losing elections are. Adams and his colleagues, by contrast, do not find indications of parties responding to previous election results by changing their ideologies (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, & Glasgow, 2004) Furthermore, parties have been found to react to competing parties, with Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) for example showing that parties tend to shift positions in the same direction as their rivalling parties have

done before. Importantly, parties have been found to change positions as a reaction to changes in public opinion as well (Adams et al., 2004; Budge, 1994). As a refinement to this observation, while mainstream parties are generally responsive to the mean voter, niche parties are sensitive to changes among their own supporters instead (Ezrow, De Vries, Steenbergen, & Edwards, 2010).

Third, evidence accumulates showing that citizens do perceive change when parties shift policy positions (Adams et al., 2014; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013). Even though voters do not seem to respond to changes in manifestos or to shifts communicated through campaign communication (Adams, Ezrow, & Somer-topcu, 2011), voters are responsive to perceptions of change –as for example observed by experts as well (Adams et al., 2014). It has also been shown that voters react more strongly to changes as observed through actual policies than through (election) promises and that when parties are in a governmental coalition, this fact acts as a heuristic for voters to perceive how parties change ideologies (Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013).

In sum, it seems as if all conditions are met for volatility to potentially be driven by voters' responsiveness to ideological shifts of parties. Tavits (2007) has indeed shown that –at an aggregate level– ideological shifts have an impact on the electoral results of parties, albeit only positively so if parties shift on pragmatic issues. It remains to be seen, however, whether at an individual-level as well, we can observe a link between ideological shifts of parties on the one hand and party switching by voters on the other. The overview of the literature makes clear that there are a number of reasons to assume that parties' shifts are indeed a driving mechanism for volatility, which leads to our first hypothesis.

H1 The more a party shifts ideologically away from the voter, the higher the probability that a voter switches parties from one election to another.

While we expect this hypothesis to hold in general, we also think it is essential to take into account aspects of heterogeneity for gaining insights in how party shifts affect individual-level volatility. As a first aspect, we have to take into account the likely conditioning effect of political sophistication on the link between party shifts and volatility. Perceiving parties' ideological positions and shifts therein, can be assumed to require a certain level of political sophistication. Analogous to what has been found with regard to economic voting and

performance voting (De Vries & Giger, 2014; Gomez & Wilson, 2001), we hypothesize that higher levels of political sophistication lead to more ideological responsiveness and to a higher probability to subsequently switch parties due to parties' ideological shifts.

H2 The more politically sophisticated is a voter, the stronger the relation between parties' ideological shifts and the voter's probability to switch parties.

In addition to individual-level heterogeneity conditioning the impact of parties' shift on volatility, we expect party-level characteristics to be influential factors as well. In parliamentary systems, it is the parties in governments that dominate the policy-making process by proposing and implementing policies (Laver & Shepsle, 1996). Opposition parties may have some influence on government policies as well, but that depends upon the majority/minority status of the government and whether the latter is formed by a coalition of parties or not (Powell, 2000: 51-55). In general, however, incumbent parties strongly control the legislative agenda in parliamentary system (Tsebelis, 2002). Given that voters' perceptions of the ideological position of parties are strongly influenced by parties' behaviours in office (Adams et al., 2014; Fortunato & Stevenson, 2013), the actions of incumbent parties should be more salient to voters than opposition parties' behaviours. Consequently, our assumption is that voters will have a better sense of party shifts when it is an incumbent party than when the party is in opposition. This assumption also relies on a conception of elections as an instrument for citizens to hold their government accountable for their actions (Powell, 2000; Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999). When a government drifts away from its initial promises – e.g. when its changes ideological position – its supporters may well punish it by switching parties.

H3a The relation between parties' ideological shifts and volatility is stronger for voters who supported an incumbent party than for voters who supported an opposition parties.

Furthermore, there are reasons to think that the type of government that is in office is of relevance as well. Scholars have previously argued that the accountability mechanism is more difficult to achieve under coalition governments than under single-party majority governments (Fisher & Hobolt, 2010; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Powell, 2000). The reason is that in case of a coalition of parties only one policy is adopted for a given issue resulting from

a compromise between parties (Martin & Vanberg, 2014) while each party is held accountable separately at election time. The fact that multiple parties are responsible for the overall government direction makes it difficult for voters to weight the responsibility of each party separately. As a result, economic and retrospective voting are generally less important under coalition governments than is the case for single-party majority governments (Fisher & Hobolt, 2010; Powell & Whitten, 1993). For these reasons, ideological shifts by parties in coalition governments are blurred by the other signals sent from the government as a whole but also by the other coalition members. We thus expect the relation between parties' ideological shifts and volatility to be stronger for voters who supported a party in a single-party government than for voters who supported an incumbent within a coalition government.

H3b The relation between parties' ideological shifts and volatility is stronger for voters who supported a party part of a single-party government than a coalition government.

4. DATA AND METHODS

In order to test the hypotheses, we use the data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) covering the 2001-2011 period. One of the main advantages of the CSES dataset is that respondents were surveyed in several countries in a standardized way. It is the comparative feature of the data – with multiple countries and hence party systems covered – that renders the CSES the ideal dataset to investigate the effect of party-level factors on volatility. We limit the analyses to countries were a sufficient number of consecutive elections is covered by election surveys in order to allow measuring shifts in party positions (see below). As a result, the focus of the current paper is on voting behaviour in advanced industrial democracies. Overall, the analyses cover 20,837 respondents in 23 elections that took place in the following countries: Australia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Great Britain.

4.1 MEASURES AND EXPECTATIONS

The dependent variable for testing the hypotheses is a dummy variable coded one if a respondent reports to have voted for a different party at the current election than at the previous election and zero if she voted for the same party. For constructing this variable, we

make use of a recall question of previous voting behaviour.[1] Such a question was included in Modules 2 and 3 of the CSES project. Relying on information obtained from recall questions to study volatility, we have to acknowledge that these are imperfect measures. Previous research has indicated that the use of recall questions leads to an underestimation of volatility, due to memory problems or because voters adjust their recalled vote to be in line with their current preference (Van Der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983; Waldahl & Aardal, 2000). The lack of comparative panel studies on election behaviour, however, renders the use of cross-sectional data and recalled vote choices the only option for investigating our research question. In the estimation sample, 29.7% of respondents report to have switched parties at the current election (standard deviation of 0.46).

In order to assess the impact of ideological shifts in party positions on respondents' likelihood of switching parties, we compute whether and to what extent the ideological distance between a respondent's position and her party position at the current election has increased or decreased since the previous election. The question used in the CSES dataset to locate respondents' left-right position is: "In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?". Respondents were also asked to locate each party on the same left-right scale. For each party, we compute the median position has perceived by all respondents.[2] By using perceived positions, we take into account previous research pointing out that voters do not react to manifestos but do react to perceived ideological positions (Adams et al., 2014). Note that for computing parties' shifts from one election to another we only use elections that were consecutive. To increase the number of consecutive elections we use data from Module 1 of the CSES dataset and we complement this with national election studies that ask respondents to locate each party on a left-right scale.[3] Our expectation is that *distance* will have a positive impact on a respondent's likelihood of switching parties (*H1*). This would indicate that if the

[1] By relying on scientific election reports of each of the elections covered, we can take into account splits and mergers of parties when constructing this measure of party switching. See Dassonneville & Dejaeghere (2014) for more details.

[2] Note that we follow Warwick's procedure (2011) and transform the parties' left-right position into a continuous variable. For each respondent, we add a random number following a uniform distribution with mean zero varying from -0.5 to 0.5. For instance, respondents who located a party at 4 on the left-right scale are now distributed uniformly over the 3.5-4.5 interval. The main implication is that instead of having party positions for each country located at position 4, 5 or 6 as is usually the case, we get party positions for each country that are more reflective of a real continuous distribution.

[3] These are Australia (2001, Australian Election Studies), Denmark (2005, Danish Election Projects – Dansk Data Arkiv), Great Britain (2001, British Election Study), Netherlands (2003, Dutch Parliamentary Election Study) and New Zealand (1999, and 2005 New Zealand Election Studies).

respondent's party has moved away ideologically from the respondent, she is more more to switch parties. Note that there is no recall question on respondents' ideological position at the previous election. Therefore, it is not possible to account for possible shifts from the part of voters themselves.

We expect the impact of *distance* on the likelihood of switching to be conditioned by individual and party-level characteristics. To measure a respondent's level of political sophistication, different operationalizations have been suggested in the literature. A number of scholars have pointed out that political knowledge is probably the best single indicator measuring political sophistication (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lachat, 2007). We hence use the three political knowledge questions provided in the CSES data set and combine them. For each respondent, we sum the number of correct answers and divided this by the average number of correct answers in the respondent's country-election sample. This procedure accounts for the cross-national variation in level of respondents' political knowledge (Singh and Thornton 2013). We expect the interaction between *sophistication* and *distance* to have a positive impact indicating that the more sophisticated a voter is, the greater the likelihood of switching should be if the party moves away from her position (*H2*). For the main effect of political sophistication on volatility, a number of different expectations have been formulated in the literature. Recent studies all empirically point out a curvilinear link, with the highest probability of switching among the middle sophisticated (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2007).

Finally, the CSES dataset provides the number of cabinet portfolios hold by each party before and after elections. Based on this information, we compute a dummy variable coded one if a respondent's party was in *government* before the election. We also compute whether a this party was part of a *single-party* or a *coalition government*. Note that these party-level variables are not election-specific but individual-specific within the country-elections data-structure. We expect the interaction between *government* and *distance* to have a positive impact indicating that the impact of parties' ideological shifts on respondents' likelihood of switching is greater for voters that supported a party in government than an opposition party (*H3a*). We also expect the interaction between *single-party government* and *distance* to be positive and greater than the interaction between *coalition government* and *distance*. This would be indication that the impact of parties' ideological shifts is greater for voters who supported a party in a single-party government than a party in a coalition government (*H3b*).

Testing these individual-level hypotheses we obviously control for a number of factors that can be thought to lead to volatility. Aside from socio-demographic variables (age, sex, education), the models also include a number of variables that have regularly been linked to volatility. First, we control for a respondent's left-right position. Furthermore, by adding the squared effect of left-right self-placements as well, we take into account the fact that the more ideologically extreme are less inclined to switch parties (Dassonneville, 2012). Second, we control for respondents' levels of satisfaction with democracy and political efficacy, as previous research has pointed out that volatility is an expression of political disaffection (Dassonneville, 2012; Zelle, 1995). Obviously, we also control for the impact of partisanship on volatility, as voters who identify with a particular party are also less likely to switch parties from one election to another. [see Appendix on how all of these variables are measured]

4.2. METHOD

The data have a hierarchical structure, with respondents nested in elections and these elections nested in countries. A number of modelling approaches can be taken to take this nested structure into account. Given that we are interested in individual-level effects and since party preferences as well are individual-specific, the focus is on the individual level only. In order to control for party- and electoral-system effects, we hence present the results of fixed effects models in which these upper-level variables are controlled for by the inclusion of election-specific dummies.

5. RESULTS

In Table 1, we test the impact of our main hypothesis – that a party shifting away from a voter increases her likelihood of switching parties (*H1*). In Model 1 in Table 1, we examine the impact of the control variables on switching without *distance*. Looking at the impact of the control variables first, they are all in expected directions. Being close to a political party significantly decreases the probability that a voter switches party. Further, both higher levels of satisfaction with democracy and higher levels of political efficacy significantly decrease the probability that a voter switches parties, confirming that political disaffection is linked to volatility. Additionally, in line with our discussion of the literature above, we find modest support for a curvilinear impact of *political sophistication* on the likelihood of switching. *Political sophistication* is positive but not statistically significant at the 0.1 level while its squared term has a negative impact and statistically significant at the 0.1 level. Despite the

focus in the literature on the link between political sophistication and volatility, we only find a weak effect of political knowledge on party switching. This observation hence gives leverage to looking at the mechanism causing volatility instead of inferring conclusions about what makes voters switch parties from the observed effect of political sophistication.

In Model 2, we include *distance* to the model. Consistent with the hypothesis (*H1*), *distance* has a positive impact on the likelihood of switching and the impact is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. It seems therefore, as if volatility is indeed – partly – driven by mechanisms of responsiveness, since the probability that a voter switches parties increases as her previous party moves away from her. In Model 3 we additionally test for the possibility that other parties moving toward the voter in between elections are driving the results. Indeed, other parties could come closer to a voter and these parties' shifts may also influence positively the likelihood of switching parties. We thus include in Model 3 *distance others* as a control variable. This variable is computed as whether and to what extent the ideological distance between a respondent's position and the closest party position has increased or decreased since the previous election.[4] The introduction of *distance others* in Model 3 does not change the magnitude of the impact of *distance* on switching. However, the impact of *distance* is now barely statistically significant at the 0.05 level with a p-value of 0.051. Adding to that, another source for nuance is the limited explanatory power of the models. While the ideological distance of the previous party is significantly linked to volatility, adding this variable does not increase the explained variance of the model compared to Model 1, as the pseudo-R^2-value remains stable at 0.095.

[4] We compute the ideological distance between a respondent's position and the closest party position at the previous election and the current election. Note that we are referring to parties that the respondent did not vote for. Also, the identity of the party involves in the computation is not necessarily the same at the current and previous elections. We also test a variable where we compute whether the average distance to the other parties has increased or decreases since the previous election. The results in the next models were not different with this alternative specification.

Table 1: The Impact of Distance on the Likelihood of Switching Parties

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)
Distance			0.109	(0.052)**	0.105	(0.054)*
Distance others					-0.069	(0.075)
Political sophistication	0.040	(0.074)	0.045	(0.075)	0.047	(0.075)
Political sophistication^2	-0.041	(0.024)*	-0.043	(0.024)*	-0.043	(0.024)*
Left-right	0.116	(0.039)***	0.108	(0.038)***	0.112	(0.039)***
Left-right^2	-0.014	(0.004)***	-0.013	(0.004)***	-0.014	(0.004)***
Age	-0.012	(0.002)***	-0.012	(0.002)***	-0.012	(0.002)***
Men	0.008	(0.036)	0.006	(0.037)	0.008	(0.036)
Education	0.029	(0.014)**	0.031	(0.014)**	0.031	(0.014)**
Partisan	-0.553	(0.034)***	-0.553	(0.034)***	-0.553	(0.034)***
Democratic satisfaction	-0.154	(0.034)***	-0.153	(0.034)***	-0.153	(0.034)***
Political efficacy	-0.033	(0.017)**	-0.033	(0.017)*	-0.034	(0.017)**
Constant	0.280	(0.208)	0.267	(0.205)	0.248	(0.197)
Pseudo R^2	0.095		0.095		0.095	
AIC	22,969.491		22,958.490		22,956.791	
Correct predictions	71.65%		71.72%		71.65%	
N individuals	20,837		20,837		20,837	
N elections	23		23		23	

Standard errors in parentheses are robust for 23 election-clusters. Dummies for country-election fixed-effects are not displayed. Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The main effect of distance is significantly related to volatility, although the explanatory power of this variable is not very large. In a next step, therefore, we examine whether the impact of *distance* is conditioned by individual and party-level factors (see Table 2). First, in order to test the conditioning impact of *political sophistication*, *political sophistication* is interacted with *distance* in Model 1. As expected (*H2*), the coefficient of the interaction effect is positive and statistically significant at the 0.1 level indicating that the impact of *distance* is greater for voters that are the most sophisticated. As it is extremely difficult to evaluate an interaction effect from the results in a regression table and to better make sense of the results, Figure 1 presents the marginal impact of *distance* as a respondent's level of *political sophistication* increases (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). For values of *political sophistication* below one (which includes approximately 37% of the respondents) voters are not more likely to switch parties when their party has moved away since the last election. However, we see that the marginal effect of *distance* on the likelihood of switching is positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level for values of *political sophistication* greater than

1. Overall, these results support our hypothesis (*H2*). As perceiving the ideological positions of parties and changes therein is quite cognitively demanding, only for the more knowledgeable do ideological shifts of parties significantly affect the probability if changing parties from one election to another.

Figure 1: **The Marginal Impact of Distance on the Likelihood of Switching as Sophistication Increases**

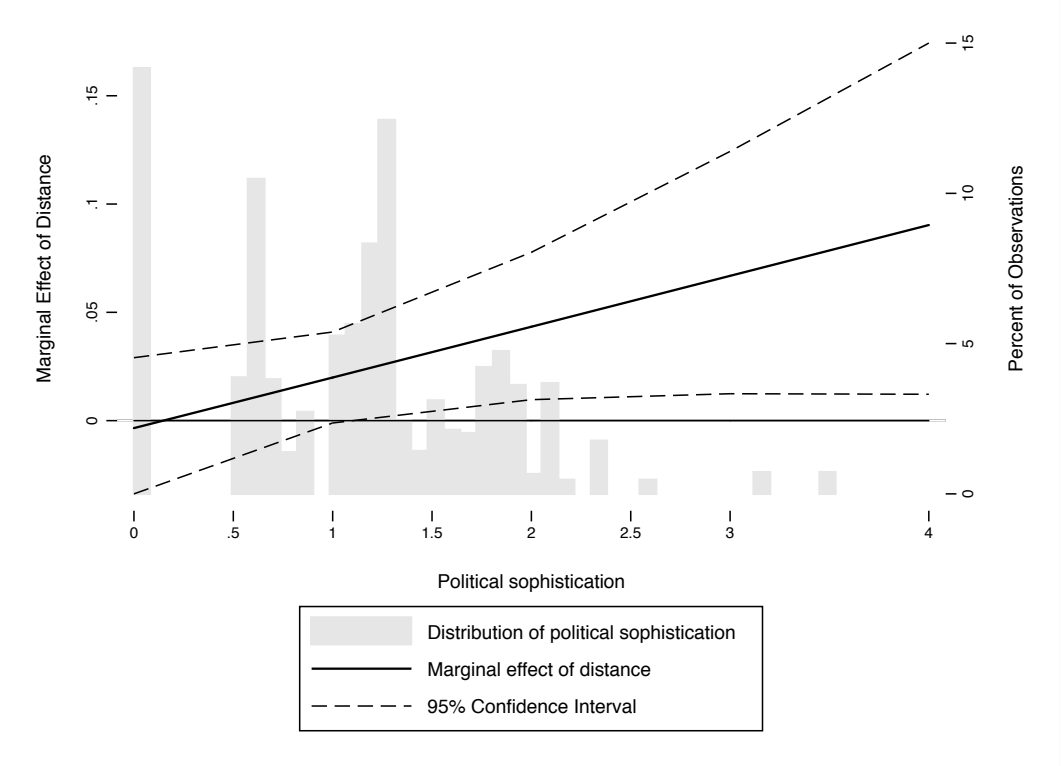

Table 2: The Conditional Impact of Sophistication and Government Participation

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)	b	(s.e.)
Distance	-0.012	(0.082)	0.046	(0.052)	0.046	(0.056)
Distance others	-0.067	(0.075)	-0.067	(0.074)	-0.076	(0.070)
Sophistication*distance	0.109	(0.062)*				
Government*distance			0.192	(0.074)**		
Single-party govt* distance					0.616	(0.262)**
Coalition govt*distance					0.180	(0.080)**
Single-party government					-0.312	(0.329)
Coalition government					0.020	(0.144)
Government			-0.011	(0.125)		
Political sophistication	-0.058	(0.021)***	0.050	(0.073)	0.049	(0.073)
Partisan	-0.554	(0.034)***	-0.553	(0.034)***	-0.552	(0.034)***
Left-right	0.111	(0.039)***	0.103	(0.039)***	0.105	(0.040)***
Left-right^2	-0.014	(0.004)***	-0.013	(0.004)***	-0.014	(0.004)***
Age	-0.012	(0.002)***	-0.012	(0.002)***	-0.012	(0.002)***
Men	0.010	(0.036)	0.009	(0.036)	0.012	(0.035)
Education	0.032	(0.014)**	0.031	(0.013)**	0.029	(0.012)**
Democratic satisfaction	-0.152	(0.034)***	-0.151	(0.038)***	-0.150	(0.037)***
Political efficacy	-0.033	(0.017)*	-0.033	(0.017)*	-0.033	(0.017)*
Constant	0.300	(0.189)	0.244	(0.201)	0.248	(0.200)
Pseudo R^2	0.095		0.096		0.096	
AIC	22,953.929		22,951.546		22,941.116	
Correct predictions	71.73%		71.68%		71.81%	
N individuals	20,837		20,837		20,837	
N elections	23		23		23	

In Model 2 and Model 3 in Table 2, we examine whether the status of a party as being in *government* or in either a *single-party* government or a *coalition government* condition the impact of *distance*. As clear from the results in Model 2, the interaction effect between *government* and *distance* is positive and statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This result supports our hypothesis (*H3a*) and indicates that voters are more likely to switch parties as their party is moving away when the party was in government compared to a situation when this party is in opposition. In terms of marginal effects, when a party is moving away from the voter by one unit on the 0-10 scale, it increases her likelihood of switching by 4 percentage points. In Model 3, we add even more detail and interact the status of a party as being in a

single-party government with *distance* and being part of a *coalition government* with *distance* (the reference category being in opposition). The coefficient of *distance* is thus assessing parties' shifts from the part of opposition parties. First, both interaction effects are positive are statistically significant at the 0.05 level and in expected directions, which is consistent with the general government results in Model 2. Second, as we predicted (*H3b*) the impact of the interaction effect of *single-party government* with *distance* is larger than the impact of the interaction of *coalition government* with *distance*: the marginal effect of *distance* is 11 percentage points and 3 percentage points for single-party governments and coalition governments, respectively. The results, hence, are not just confirming our hypotheses but indicate substantive effects as well. As holds for the main effects in Table 1, however, the limited explained variance that each of the models offers reasons for nuance.

6. DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to disentangle more precisely the mechanisms that cause voters to switch parties from one election to another. By doing so, we move research focusing on the link between political sophistication and volatility further. Furthermore, by linking parties' ideological shifts to individual-level volatility, we also add to the literature on voter-party responsiveness. This line of research is still mostly limited to the impact of parties' shifts on voters' perceptions instead of the behavioural consequences thereof.

The results of our analyses do confirm what we hypothesized. Most importantly, as parties shift ideologically away from their voters, these voters are more likely to switch to another party. This result – despite the rather low explained power of our models – goes counter the conception of *'floating voters'* who switch randomly. Instead, voters do respond to how parties are perceived to move ideologically, which indicates that switching parties is to a certain extent a tool for voters to hold parties accountable. Additionally, the estimated effect of political sophistication suggests a curvilinear effect. In line with what previous research already indicated, the middle sophisticated are most likely to switch parties, which further indicates that we should not consider party switching an act of disinterested and uninformed voters only. The analyses presented in this paper not only point out that a certain level of political sophistication is needed for voters to switch parties, political sophistication also fosters the impact of parties' ideological shifts and hence of accountability on volatility.

The observed mechanism of accountability is cognitively quite demanding. A number of contextual circumstances, however, can help voters in seeing parties switch positions and reacting accordingly. Our results indicate two important factors: the impact of ideological shifts on party switching is stronger for government parties than is the case for parties in opposition. Additionally, this is even more strongly so when a party is the only party in government. Our results thus support Fisher and Hobolt's findings (2010) that accountability is more difficult to achieve for voters when their party is part of a coalition government.

Obviously, this study suffers from a number of limitations. First, our focus on parties' shifts necessitates the reliance on a dataset that covers a substantial number of parties. We hence chose to use the data from a large comparative dataset, the CSES. The cross-sectional nature of the election studies in this dataset, however, implies that we have to rely on a recall question for investigating volatility. We hence have to acknowledge that we most likely underestimate the true amount of volatility. In the absence of large comparative datasets of election studies of a panel format, however, the use of recall data is the only way out (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014).

Second, while we do measure shifts in parties' ideological positions, we cannot take into account whether voters as well have moved ideologically. It is thus possible that we over-estimate the impact of *distance* in the empirical models since this variable may also capture the fact that voters have moved away from their party. However, given that the most sophisticated have more entrenched political attitudes (Zaller, 1992; 2000) they should not change significantly their ideological position in between election.

Despite these limitations, however, we think our results are insightful and add to our knowledge in the fields of volatility as well as responsiveness. More research, however, is needed on the nature of the mechanism and more studies should validate whether our results hold if panel-data could be used for investigating our research questions.

7. APPENDIX

In this section, we detail the computation of the control variables of Tables 1 and 2. *Age* is computed as the age of a respondent and ranges between 18 and 100. *Men* is a dummy variable coded one for men and zero for women. *Education* is an ordinal variable that ranges from 1 to 8. *Party identification* is an ordinal variable coded 0 for non-partisans, 1 for respondents who feel not very close to their party, 2 for those who feel somewhat close, and 3 for those who feel very close to their party. *Democratic satisfaction* is an ordinal variable coded 0 for respondents who are not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, 1 for those who are not very satisfied, 2 for those who are fairly satisfied, and 3 for those who are very satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. *Political efficacy* is the average of two questions: *who is in power can make a difference* and *who people vote for makes a difference*. This variable ranges from one to five. The question used in the CSES dataset to locate respondents' left-right position is: "In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?". *Left-right* thus ranges from 0 to 10.

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